



Review

Ib Andersen's *Romeo & Juliet* Romances the Audience

by Kenneth LaFave

The idea of celebrating Valentine's Day with a story about doomed lovers is almost as insane as taking a work of literature known for its many familiar phrases and making it into a stage piece totally devoid of words. Yet the ballet version of *Romeo and Juliet*, which dates back to 1930s Soviet Union, has been a global triumph since its premiere, and Ballet Arizona's several productions over the years have always packed 'em in around the Valentine holiday. The latest staging, which opened last night at Phoenix Symphony Hall, has once again to judge from the nearly sold-out house proven a draw for lovers willing to overlook the tragic aspects of the story and revel in its iconic romantic appeal.

In that way, the 2013 Ballet Arizona *Romeo and Juliet* is no different from earlier incarnations. But in most other ways, it is a different beast altogether – technically stronger, theatrically richer, conceptually deeper. This is no easy comparison to earlier duds; the last Ballet Arizona *Romeo and Juliet* several seasons back was striking and memorable. The latest edition simply moves the bar up that much higher.

It was a night that made the story live afresh, due to many factors. There was first what might be called the transformation of Jillian Barrell. Barrell has been a favored principal in this company for several years, dancing lead roles in ballet after ballet. In all that time, she has displayed technical mastery and a kind of all-American charm. But she has never seemed anything but diffident, or at best, detached, as if her body was dancing but her person was roaming elsewhere – backstage perhaps, looking on. Last night, Barrell shone as Juliet. There was a person in the technically perfect body. Part of the reason for this, no doubt, was due to an acting ability Barrell has only recently discovered, or at least cultivated. Her scenes in the last act – of having to face the grim task of taking the poison, of awakening in the crypt – riveted all attention on the character and her tragic circumstances.

A bigger part of it, for me, constituted signs in Barrell's performance of a new musicality. An elusive trait associated most vividly with the Balanchine school, musicality means a dancer's ability to phrase in conjunction with the music while paradoxically maintaining her own inner rhythms. If a dancer's movement parallels the music but does not mimic it, that's musicality. Last night, Barrell and the music were two related but independent facets of the same unit.

About that music: Prokofiev's score is a miracle of subtle dramatic correspondence with the story. It brings an unexpected but apt darkness to the ball scene, poignancy to Juliet's youth, breathtaking intensity to the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt. Under the baton of Timothy Russell, the Phoenix Symphony lit up every corner of the score and let us hear the tragedy, even as it unfolded visually before us. Scenery and costume design by Alain Vaes eschewed spectacle for a more intimate feeling, abetted by Michael Korsch's lighting.

The choreography by Ballet Arizona Artistic Director Ib Andersen throws the stylized, the abstract and the realistic up into the air like a juggler tosses pins. In one scene, the people of Verona formalize a folk dance; in another, avatars of the title characters dance past each other, mutually oblivious; while in another, blades flash in swordplay fit for a movie battle scene. The narrative almost seems to free Andersen from any obligation to be literal; visual imagination runs delightfully riot.

Barrell's Romeo was Nayon Iovino, a Brazilian new to the company, and a generously gifted dancer-actor. Iovino conveyed his character's insouciance via an easygoing technique and facial expression. Roman Zavarov was the nimble and playful Mercutio. Myles Lavalley oozed malevolence as Tybalt; Zherlin Ndudi brought energetic cheerfulness to Benvolio. The cast varies in the remaining performances.

Ib Andersen's *Romeo & Juliet*
Through February 17
With The Phoenix Symphony
At Symphony Hall
Choreography by Ib Andersen
Music by Sergei Prokofiev
www.balletaz.org or 602-381-1096



Ballet Arizona's Jillian Barrell and Nayon Iovino in Ib Andersen's *Romeo and Juliet*. Photos by Rosalie O'Connor

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